

Finnish plays thing of past



Anyone recognize the picture accompanying this article? It was found by Jean Velasquez, 228 Fifth, in the house she bought 11 years ago, and she is curious about it.

Old timers to whom I have shown the picture are quite sure it was taken of a dramatic presentation probably in Suomi Hall a good many years ago. Possibly it was in the old Socialist Hall that burned down in the early 1920s, but Mrs. Toivo Sjoblom is quite sure the photo was taken in Suomi Hall. She says the stage settings look familiar. Some of them were painted by local Finnish folk.

Mrs. Sjoblom was a member of the dramatic club of the Finnish Brotherhood lodge, which for many years presented plays in the Finnish language at Suomi Hall.

I remember attending some of these plays 20 years and more ago.

No one to whom I showed the picture could identify the play nor any of the performers. Mrs. Sjoblom said the uniforms were apparently reproductions of Finnish Army uniforms of a half century or so ago.

The bearded man in the front row in the photo is wearing a pair of Finnish boots with turned-up, pointed toes. Old timers say there is, or was recently, this pair or a similar pair of boots among stage properties stored in the attic of Suomi Hall.

The old Finnish Brotherhood dramatic club no longer presents Finnish dramas in Astoria. Old timers say that the performers gradually lost interest, over the years, in the hard work that preparation of a dramatic presentation involves. Shows became scarcer and scarcer and finally ceased entirely.

Finnish plays were first staged in the old Socialist Hall. As years passed the program came gradually under the dominance of communist-oriented leadership, leading to secession of many Finns not sympathetic to communism. Some time later the Finnish Brotherhood took over the dramatic work.

The Socialist Hall burned down some time after 1924 but before 1927.

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Speaking of 1927, I was reminded the other day that we permitted a significant anniversary to pass last year without attention. It was the 50th anniversary of acceptance by the 1927 legislature of the Oregon State song, "Land of the Empire Builders."

There was a contest during the early 1920s to select an official Oregon song. Judge James A. Buchanan, Astoria municipal judge and prominent local citizen, liked poetry and had published a couple of books of his poems. He decided to try his hand at a state song, and produced "Land of the Empire Builders," which won the contest and was adopted officially by the 1927 legislature.



The song was set to music by Henry Murtagh, who played the pipe organ in one of the Portland movie theaters and had considerable reputation as a composer.

I can remember that back in the 1920s and early 1930s the Kiwanis Club, of which Judge Buchanan was secretary for many years, used to sing the song at all its meetings. A good custom which deserves reviving.

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Speaking of anniversaries, next year will be the 100th anniversary of the visit by President U.S. Grant to Astoria. He was the first president of the United States to come to Astoria and in the subsequent 99 years only one other has come — President John F. Kennedy in 1963, only a few months before he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The Daily Astorian of October 14, 1879, carries a report of Gen. Grant's visit the day before. The paper still called him Gen. Grant, although he was President.

The steamer St. Paul had been chartered to bring the president north from San Francisco, and it arrived at Astoria at 8 a.m. October 13, four days after leaving S.F.

School children had a holiday. Shipping in the harbor was decked with

flags, as were downtown buildings. Guns of Forts Stevens and Canby fired salutes as the ship passed into the river, and in Astoria bells rang and whistles blew as the St. Paul docked at the foot of 9th, where a platform had been erected on the wharf in front of the Parker House hotel.

The president came ashore and mounted the platform, where Mayor W. W. Parker delivered an address of welcome.

Mayor Parker described the president as "the silent man of destiny, whom all nations have so lately honored." The president was returning to Washington, D.C., from a journey abroad.

The president responded, commenting that he had travelled up and down the river often 27 years before.

"This is my ninth visit to this city, but never before have I had the pleasure of landing here," he said. "The hills behind the town seem lower today than they did then."

The president was referring to his army service in the Pacific Northwest in the 1850s, when military duties had required him to travel quite widely in the region. I remember that as a boy, living in the Naches valley near Yakima, I was informed that Lt. Grant

had once commanded the Wenas army post just over the hill in Wenas Creek Valley.

The president did not remain long in Astoria. He left later the same morning aboard the St. Paul, bound for Vancouver, Wash.

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Seems a bit impolite on the part of the federal government to shift Columbus Day this year to the same date as Leif Ericsson Day. It's the sort of careless thing that can happen once it becomes policy to move holidays around the calendar simply to give federal employees three-day weekends.

At least, however, it called attention to Leif Ericsson Day, which generally is neglected by Americans obsessed with the idea that Columbus discovered America, rather than the great Norse navigator who beat him here by nearly 500 years.

As a suggestion, why don't local Norse-descended citizens whip up an annual observance of some kind on October 9 each year, so people won't completely forget and ignore the date?

Since archeological discoveries have pretty well confirmed that the Norse did arrive in North America about the year 1000, certainly their adventure deserves commemorating adequately.